

SUB/XXX/20XX

From: Sharron Russell

Date: 15 November 2020

1. Moira Doherty (Cleared 18/11/20)
2. Special Advisor
3. Minister

WARM, WELL AND CONNECTED – WINTER WELLBEING INTERVENTIONS

Issue:	There is evidence that the continued impact of Covid 19 is creating a need for some additional interventions in terms of keeping warm, well and connected to emotional and practical support. You asked for proposals for a fund to address these issues.
Timing:	Urgent – due to need to approach delivery partners and pressures created by winter and the Christmas holiday period.
FOI Implications:	In the event of a request for disclosure of information contained in this submission under the FOI Act, the request would be considered in the context of the

relevant provisions of the legislation, including any relevant exemptions that may be applicable.

Presentational Issues: There is continuing stakeholder interest in the Department's support for VCS organisations delivering assistance to individuals and families in need. A press release and media handling plan will be needed for the announcement, the Christmas response will be of particular interest given the additional burdens on households this year. Cleared by Press Office. LF. 13/11/20

Financial Implications: £3m has been allocated from additional COVID 19 funding in October Monitoring. - Cleared Finance 13/11

Legislation Implications: None.

Equality Implications: The Emergency Response Programme in its entirety is focused on addressing objective need arising from the impacts of the public health emergency. In the design of these proposals we have engaged with a wide range of representative groups all of whom have had input to an equality impact analysis, with adjustments made to address gaps identified. A PEQIA has been completed and our assessment is that in order to fully meet our statutory duty; given the fact that the time available to get support on the ground does not permit a full 12 week consultation, is that we proceed with the open approach to ongoing engagement, reviewing differential need and gaps in support, making adjustments quickly and responsively. An element of the overall budget has been set aside for this

purpose. Women and those aged 18-24 have been differentially impacted financially, and those living with disability and LGBTQ groups are more likely to have differential wellbeing needs. These groups will be a feature of our ongoing scoping and engagement work too allow us to respond to their particular needs.

A Rural Needs Assessment has also identified some potential gaps in reach and we are working very closely with ELG, RCN, RSNs and DAERA to ensure these gaps are addressed in delivery.

**Executive Referral /
Cross-cutting Issues:**

The Emergency Response Programme aligns with actions being taken forward by Economy, Health and Education in particular. Officials working on Mental Health in the Department of Health and on Community Health Prevention in the PHA have been engaged in the design process and are content that proposals set out will add value and not duplicate existing interventions.

Communities Committee: Committee will be updated as work progresses.

Recommendation: That you consider this briefing and agree the design and commissioning proposals set out.

Background

1. Through our ongoing engagement with key partners since the beginning of the pandemic, issues and impacts on the ground have been monitored. More recently, partners have highlighted a number of emerging and increasing concerns. In the main these concerns relate to impacts on mental health and financial hardship.

2. Linking to this you have allocated £3m and requested that officials consider how we can address some of these ongoing and newly emerging needs facing communities.
3. In order to ensure that any funding addresses both the most pressing needs and supports those most acutely affected, a further scoping exercise has been carried out in liaison with a number of key stakeholders including Minister's Covid 19 Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Leadership Group, local Community Development Trusts, the Public Health Agency and the Rural Community Network. A full list of the stakeholders engaged is attached at **Annex A**.
4. Additionally, we have gathered data from NISRA and other sources, which provides further evidence of the negative economic and wellbeing impacts from the ongoing pandemic. This evidence is attached at Annex B.
5. Based on all of the above, this submission sets out details of the groups most acutely affected by the pandemic, the needs being felt and the proposed way forward in terms of delivering support on the ground.

Emerging Need – Effective Targeting

(i) What emerging and increasing needs are coming to the fore?

6. The scoping and engagement exercises as outlined above have identified the following key issues:
 - Loneliness and Isolation
 - Mental Health issues including anxiety
 - Financial Hardship relating to Household Bills
7. Notably, our engagements have highlighted that while these issues have been ongoing throughout the pandemic, they are on the increase and being felt by other groups of people such as those who have now lost income due to the pandemic.

(ii) Who is impacted?

8. Engagement with Health sector colleagues and community stakeholders in relation to who has and will continue to experience the greatest need indicates that the following groups should be directly targeted across the region, but with an additional focus on areas of disadvantage:

- Children and Young People
- Older People, particularly those living alone
- People Living with Disability and their Carers
- Anyone who has lost income¹ as a direct result of the pandemic
- Clinically extremely vulnerable (previously shielding)
- People from Ethnic Minorities

9. Given our remit and experience to date and the outstanding commitment levels that have been seen in the Community and Voluntary Sector, a specific Wellbeing and Resilience Programme will be developed for the VCS, with sectoral leaders and grass roots activists.

Wellbeing and the Department's role

10. It is proposed that a response to wellbeing is focused on community development approaches to addressing the social determinants of health inequalities, supporting preventative activities to address material and emotional wellbeing. There are many good examples of activities across Neighbourhood Renewal areas, including Good Morning and Befriending Services, Eat and Drink Well and Healthy Eating and Living initiatives. Importantly, additional investment would support more clinically focused mental health and psychological services offered by Health and PHA.

11. The focus of community support to date has been through additional funding of £3.7m allocated through the Community Support Fund to Councils to support delivery of initiatives linked to Financial Need, Food Need and Social Isolation, together with an initial direct supply of food to individuals shielding with no other

¹ The hospitality sector and taxi industry losses are in specific scope for direct targeting.

access to food or in financial hardship, to a more sustainable community led offer alongside the Fareshare contract to supply food to community food providers. In addition, funding of £50k was made available for the development and delivery of the Community Wellbeing NI Hub that provides a wide range of online advice, self-help tools and links into direct community support.

12. Importantly, the systems of support and additional infrastructure that has been stood up to support the Covid 19 responses to date, such as the Covid 19 Community Helpline and local government support hubs, will be utilised to identify need for wellbeing interventions and for those delivering wellbeing interventions to connect people into food support and other services.

13. The winter, especially Christmas and New Year can be challenging both financially and emotionally for so many in normal times. The Covid 19 context, with prolonged social restrictions, and many having experienced disconnections from family, social isolation, sickness and loss, is predicted to exacerbate those emotional challenges this year; alongside the obvious and easier to measure economic losses. From lessons learned in the first lockdown, we foresee a need for differential levels of support in rural areas, and these have been built into the proposals set out.

What Works for Wellbeing

14. The evidence we have from our Emergencies Leadership Group members, Advice and NR partners is that there is growing concern in relation to food and other material and emotional needs in the run up to the Christmas period and into January and beyond. An additional allocation of £3.5m has been made for a food response, and this has been developed as a separate, but linked, proposal which is with Minister for consideration.

15. The remaining gap in terms of material need that has the potential to undermine and negate any investment we might make in wellbeing interventions, remains the issue of fuel poverty. In all of the discussions that officials have had in the

development of these proposals, the need for people to be able to afford to heat their homes over Christmas and New Year has been identified as an absolute priority and a pre-requisite of any wellbeing intervention. In the words of one community leader *'you can't be well if your children aren't warm at night'*.

16. Minister has commissioned work to bring forward options for a heating payment, made through the benefits system, to provide financial assistance in recognition of additional costs arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Subject to the necessary approvals and system development, it is anticipated that these payments will be made at the end of January, within the critical winter period. To provide an immediate emergency response, **it is proposed that Fuel Support is included as a core element of support covered by the additional allocation of funding**, as denoted by the working title for the overall package of Wellbeing interventions set out.
17. The targeting of fuel support will be important, as it would be discretionary in the context of a budget that could not support offering it wider than those in absolute need with no other recourse to support. The involvement of Discretionary Support team in Work and Health and Supporting People colleagues in the design of a criteria will be important and discussions are ongoing. At this stage, the proposal is that, as part of Warm, Well and Connected, practical fuel support of up to £50 maximum in value is delivered, with no cash or vouchers involved. In addition, since it is anticipated that the Department's financial response will be in place from end January, the Warm, Well and Connected fuel support element would end at that stage, for those who will be supported through that wider benefit related support. Thinking and design of this element continues.
18. The PHA has carried out a review of its community prevention interventions on the ground in the context of gaps in addressing need, and delivery capacity. The evidence gathered from that review would indicate that if we are to avoid duplication and add value to existing investment in keeping people emotionally well, proposed actions, around which we would not seek to be prescriptive, should address the following themes:

Wellbeing Need

- Emotional Support to address **Loneliness, Isolation and Connectedness**
- Maintaining Good **Mental Health** – linking into self-support and community programmes
- **Physical Activity** – note, not exercise, just keeping active
- **Nutrition** – promoting and actively supporting healthy eating and drinking

19. It will be important to connect into existing Covid 19 related initiatives and that a connection into existing, longer term services and support is made for those availing of what are short term interventions. As a first step, Christmas food need, benefit entitlement checks and need for money / debt support should be explored.

Delivery Constraints and Risks

20. The pace at which this needs to be stood up presents a risk in relation to evidence informed design and effective targeting, with a risk of duplication. Local government funding to end year has yet to be allocated (£2.75m) and officials are engaged with Council colleagues to agree a proposed criteria for this at present. To mitigate the risk of duplication, all existing partners involved in the Emergency Response Programme have been engaged in the development of these proposals and, along with the Emergencies Leadership Group, will be invited to a Design and Delivery Workshop with those to be involved in delivery when this has been agreed by Minister. The focus of this work will be to agree the targeting approach and to identify gaps and ensure no overlap / duplication of effort.

Commissioning Options

21. In providing the mandate for officials to design a Wellbeing response, Minister expressed the desire to ensure that Neighbourhood Renewal areas were targeted. First engagements therefore involved the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme team and existing partners on the ground. NR covers c16% of the

population and only urban areas of multiple deprivation. 16% of the overall budget equates to £480k, which has been rounded up to £500k in terms of the proposed allocation. NR colleagues have provided an assurance that the capacity exists to utilise this funding in a targeted way to drive out and improve positive wellbeing impacts.

22. The current pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, but the economic impacts are being felt right across our communities and by people and sectors rarely requiring government support before. As referenced above, the propensity for those living in rural communities to feel isolated and disconnected is often higher, with a resultant need for greater wellbeing support.
23. A number of options in addition to additional allocations to NR Partnerships were therefore identified.

Option 1: Local Government – as in the Covid Community Support Fund, additional allocations could be channelled through local government in the context of the existing community development policy framework to address specific Covid related Wellbeing needs. Whilst there would be some merit in this approach, most Councils have been and continue to prioritise material need, such as food; council officers are engaged intensively in planning discussions with the Department for the Christmas food response and together with the remaining Covid Support funding, they report that they have neither the capacity or lead time required for commission additional wellbeing interventions in time for delivery before Christmas.

Option 2: Open Call – Competitive Grant - an open call for proposals from community based organisations with existing infrastructure, wellbeing experience and reach into communities would be the ideal approach in normal times. This would provide for many small community based organisations and Section 75 interest groups to propose unique interventions tailored to their areas and interests. However, such an approach would require an absolute minimum of six weeks from communicating the invitation to bid for grant funding to allocation of

grant funding and could therefore not be delivered in the timescale, given Minister's clearly stated aim for interventions to be on the ground in time to provide the support that people need at Christmas and New Year.

Option 3: Invite Proposals from Regionally Significant Organisations- this option would see a small number of regionally significant networked organisations, with recent and ongoing experience of delivering Wellbeing interventions, and with depth in terms of community intelligence and reach, working in partnership with smaller community organisations, statutory agencies and our existing Emergency Response Programme infrastructure to meet need. The need for regional coverage would be critical, with a particular focus on rural reach. In the time available, to deliver the best possible prospect of additional wellbeing interventions being up and running on the ground before Christmas, this option is the only one that stands up to a risk analysis focused on the timeline for timely and effective delivery.

24. Having considered the requirement, the delivery options and risks, including timescales, governance and procedural requirements (in local government as well as in the Department), it is proposed that a number of regionally significant, networked voluntary organisations are invited to set out proposals for delivery of a range of interventions against the identified themes for improving wellbeing. Those organisations with the most potential to deliver are identified below:

- **Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships** (including Areas at Risk and Small Pockets of Deprivation) x 65
- **Rural Support Networks** x 6, reaching 1,500 smaller rural groups.
- **The Healthy Living Centre Alliance** - 29 locations across all council areas.
- **Bryson Energy** - heating, electricity and potentially white goods needs.

25. In addition to these groups, and before the RSNs were considered, the Rural Community Network was identified as an option, but it has ruled itself out due to capacity issues.

26. **Table 1** sets out the proposed delivery partners and outline allocations. A commissioning for Outcomes approach is proposed. This would see the Department invite costed proposals for delivery of a range of evidence based interventions against all of the four component of good wellbeing, allowing for flexibility and invocation in delivery. To address concerns that organisations will have around the contracted timescales, a simplified application and assessment process has been designed with a clear VFM test (includes social value), with monitoring and reporting to be centred on the quantum of people receiving support on the ground, the nature and quality of that support and outcomes in three months' time. Connections into ongoing support and 'better off' assessments will be critical elements of our outcomes monitoring.

Table 1 - Proposed Breakdown of Interventions and Allocations

Theme	Organisation	Rationale	Allocation
Keeping People WARM	Bryson Home Energy	<p>A social enterprise organisation with charitable status and regional reach, with a specific Home Energy focus for over 20 years. Bryson delivered emergency support in the first lockdown to over 5,000 people, 2,500 of which were children and young people, in the form of home heating, electricity and white goods. The emergency fuel crisis intervention did not involve vouchers or money changing hands, rather 'top ups' were made directly by Bryson staff, thus ensuring no conflict with the benefit system. Community based partner organisations were used to identify need and to act as referral agents.</p> <p>Design questions remain in relation to a £50 maximum award is sufficient and whether white goods support for those not entitled to Discretionary support exists. If Minister was minded to support a white goods element, the</p>	<p>£850k</p> <p>Fuel for c.15,000 households.</p>

		<p>proposed allocation for Bryson could increase.</p> <p>As a not for profit charity, Bryson can commit senior management and oversight at no cost, with all overheads kept to a minimum to ensure that funding is directed to meet need on the ground. <u>The organisation met the cost of the initial Covid crisis intervention (£250k / 5k people) from its own reserves.</u></p>	
Keeping People WELL	Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships	<p>The 36 existing NR Partnerships, 17 Areas at Risk and 12 Small Pockets of Deprivation are already delivering a range of material and emotional wellbeing responses on the ground and the department has a strong funding relationship with them. Capacity to extend services to provide for additional and new need has been assessed and officials are satisfied that up to £500k can be used to target and meet community need, tying in with the food support that each of the partnerships will also be involved in delivering.</p>	£500k
	The Healthy Living Centre Alliance (29 Centres)	<p>An award winning, active network of 29 community led health improvement organisations based in areas of high health inequalities, both rural and urban; driving actions to connect people into community based services and challenging the wider public sector to link better into working class and poor communities. Like Bryson and NR Partnerships, Healthy Living Centres have been delivering a range of health prevention and wellbeing initiatives during the first lockdown phase of the pandemic and are now facing capacity issues just at a stage when need is increasing. Each HLC works closely with all GPs (Social Prescribing) schools and Family Support Hubs in their areas. They are therefore ideally positioned to directly identify and target need, accept</p>	£750k

		referrals from other Emergency Response Programme partners on the ground and to connect people into sustainable support services.	
Keeping People CONNECTED	Rural Support Networks (Six Networks reaching 1,500 rural community organisations)	<p>The six Rural Support Networks are a strong and unique rural infrastructure which exist to support, enable and empower rural communities through the provision of a wide range of services.</p> <p>DAERA has secured a small budget of £100k which could be used to match fund any investment by this Department.</p> <p>North Antrim Community Network</p> <p>County Down Rural Community</p> <p>TADA Rural Support Network (Portadown)</p> <p>Community Organisations of South Tyrone and Areas (COSTA)</p> <p>Cookstown and Western Shores Area Network)</p> <p>Omagh Forum for Rural Associations</p> <p>Rapid Community Network (Derry)</p>	£500k Plus DAERA match-funding of £100k
Innovation and Inclusion Element	VCS Resilience and Wellbeing Programme (NICVA £10k) Sporting Codes (£30k) Libraries & Museums (tbc)	<p>It is proposed that a proportion of the Wellbeing funding is retained for to support emerging innovation as well as gaps that may have arisen due to the pace of these proposals coming forward. The Sporting codes are already engaged in design of wellbeing interventions, with any potential need for funding being small, and discussions are ongoing with the arts sector to explore the potential for some type of initiative that could engender a sense of community solidarity and celebrate the</p>	£400k²

² This could be reduced if the allocation to Bryson was uplifted to provide for 'white goods' for those in extreme crisis at Christmas and not eligible for an award from DS.

	<p>The Arts, and Music Industries. (tbc)</p> <p>Disability, Gender and LGBTQ specific focus.</p>	<p>achievements of communities to date in responding to the pandemic.</p> <p>For example, engagement with the Rural Community Network has identified an innovative approach to reaching very rural areas of Strabane, through a 'coffee caravan' linked to wellbeing and arts and creativity community organisations. (£25k)</p> <p>Traditionally, the so called 'January Blues' can affect some groups disproportionately, hence the need for further discussions with disability, gender and LBGTQ groups to identify need and any response that we can deliver to mitigate wellbeing being disproportionately adversely impacted.</p>	
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Timeline for Delivery

27. If interventions, particularly those related to fuel and heating are to be in place before Christmas, we need to invite proposals by **Friday 20 November**. In addition, an engagement process with the partner organisations identified will be necessary before any award of grant funding to refine outline proposals, identify gaps and reduce the potential for overlap / duplication. It is anticipated that further engagement with DAERA and PHA will inform this work.
28. It is anticipated that funding could be allocated formally by 11 December. However, the benefit of working with larger, regional organisations is that they will proceed to deliver earlier, at risk, if they know that the Department has agreed to fund their proposals.

Conclusion

29. The development of these proposals and the recommended approach has been constrained by the time and resource available internally, and by the capacity issues being faced by local government and our Voluntary and Community Sector partners. However, this has brought to bear some creative and innovative

thinking, and a recommended approach to commissioning for outcomes, adding value to and building on work that has been funded by Health and PHA, together with match funding from DAERA for rural areas. Importantly, the level of engagement undertaken to inform the proposals provides the Minister with assurance in relation to an inclusive approach to design. To mitigate the risk of any gaps in our analysis, officials have proposed holding back a proportion of the budget to allow for further engagement with Section 75 groups.

Recommendation

30. You are asked to note this briefing, agree the funding allocations and agree that the identified delivery partners are invited to submit proposals for the proposed Wellbeing interventions that will keep people Warm, Well and Connected this winter.

31. I would be happy to walk through the proposals set out if that would be helpful.

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Key Stakeholders – scoping exercise

- Covid 19 Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Leadership Group.
- Two Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships.
- Local government community development officers.
- NIHE's Supporting People Programme.
- Resurgam Trust and Fermanagh Trust.
- East Belfast Community Development Association.
- Advice NI
- North Belfast Advice Partnership
- The Rural Community Network.
- DAERA.
- Department of Health
- Public Health Agency
- The Commissioner for Children and Young People.
- The Commissioner for Older People.
- The People's Kitchen
- Disability Action.

- The volume of new cases of Covid 19 reduced significantly over the summer months. Shielding ended in Northern Ireland on 31 July 2020 and the delivery of food boxes stopped as of that date (delivery to those non shielding ended on 30 June 2020). Over the summer months demand for the services offered by the VCS Emergencies Response Programme decreased significantly although there was still a steady demand for support demonstrated by calls to the Covid Community Helpline.
- As autumn approached a second wave of Covid 19 cases clearly started to grow and demand for services provided through the Emergencies Response Programme has once again began to rise. There were 51 Covid related deaths registered in the week to 30 October bringing the total number of deaths in Northern Ireland to 1,023. Deaths in hospitals and care homes have now risen to the same level as they were in April /May. 42,917 people have tested positive for the virus in Northern Ireland to date. On 8 November 2020 there were 396 inpatients in Northern Ireland hospitals with Covid 19, 55 of whom were in ICU.

Mental Health

- On 3 August 2020 the Department of Health published a Rapid Review on the Mental Health Impact of Covid 19 Pandemic in Northern Ireland. It stated that: "The COVID-19 pandemic will leave many people vulnerable to mental health problems and suicidal behaviour. There will be mental health ramifications as a result of COVID-19 beyond that of the population with pre-existing mental health conditions (Holmes et al., 2020). Mental health consequences are likely to be present for longer and peak later than the actual pandemic (Gunnell et al., 2020)." Northern Ireland already had a 25% higher rate of mental health problems than the UK average, potentially as a legacy of the Troubles. The additional strain on existing mental health services as a result of the Pandemic could be overwhelming.
- The average (mean) wellbeing rating of people interviewed in the period April-September 2020 for 'life satisfaction' was significantly lower than that reported by NISRA for the 2018/191 year. Anxiety levels in the same period were also significantly higher than that reported by NISRA for 2018/19. There were no significant differences observed in the wellbeing ratings of people feeling what they do in life is 'worthwhile' and 'happiness' when compared with that reported by NISRA for the 2018/19 year.

Table 1 - Comparing Personal Wellbeing averages with the latest NISRA published data

Average (mean)	Life Satisfaction	Worthwhile	Happiness	Anxiety
Phases 1 – 4 (April-September 2020)	7.63	7.91	7.63	3.20
Personal Wellbeing in NI 18/19	7.89	8.07	7.69	2.83

Economic Impact

- The economic impacts of the pandemic are unprecedented. These impacts highlight the need to protect vulnerable populations. Output in Northern Ireland is estimated to have contracted by 12.7% over the year. In a report on the economic impact of Covid 19 on the Arts, Culture and Heritage sector in Northern Ireland the UUEPC stated:

“The policy interventions that are in place to support individuals, enterprises and the economy are also unprecedented. An additional £2.3bn has been allocated to the Executive as part of the Government’s response. At its peak, 249,000 jobs were being supported in NI via the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and it is estimated that the share of UK wide supports such as the CJRS, the Self Employment Scheme and Business Interruption Loan Schemes etc have resulted in £1.5bn of additional income to enterprises and individuals in NI so far. At time of writing, there is increasing uncertainty as to the future sustainability of both the labour market and the nascent economic recovery, due to rising transmission rates across the UK and the winding down of the most vital support schemes like CJRS. The recent “circuit breaker” lockdowns, the prolonged test of resilience and accordingly, reductions in consumer confidence means the path of recovery is likely to be uneven.”
- The Department for the Economy published a paper on the “Potential Economic Impact of the 4-week circuit breaker” on 11 November following the additional restrictions which were introduced on 16 October. The report states:

“Initial indications are that the four-week circuit breaker introduced in Northern Ireland may lead to a loss of £400m to our economy. Even if this is an overestimate, we consider the impact is probably in the magnitude of hundreds of millions of pounds (i.e. £200m plus). The figures include direct and indirect losses along with the costs of a potential delay to the partial recovery. This comes on top of losses of £4bn to 5bn already caused by the

impact of Covid-19 and the original lockdown earlier this year. Severe financial consequences experienced by the Accommodation & Food, Close Contact Services and the Arts, Entertainment & Recreation sectors, and supply chain businesses, with a direct impact of the circuit breaker on around 60,000 jobs. Many workers have been affected, but indications are that females, younger workers and those on low pay may have been most adversely affected.”

Jobs

- From 1 September 2019 to 31 August 2020, 9160 redundancies were proposed in Northern Ireland, the highest number of proposed collective redundancies on record. The latest Labour Market Report for Northern Ireland published by NISRA on 13 October stated that in September 2020 there were 1,150 proposed redundancies and 570 proposed between 1 and 12 October. The NI Claimant Count for September 2020 stands at 62,000 which is more than double the number recorded in March 2020. In the Quarter June 2020 to August 2020 the NI unemployment rate increased 1.2 points to 3.7%.